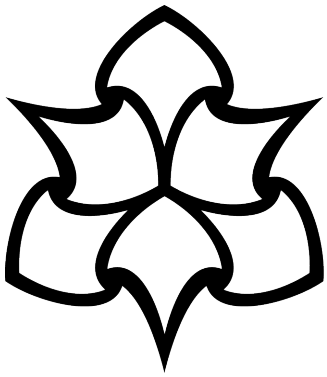

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SPORTING DIRECTOR ROLE IN FOOTBALL AND THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY IN FUTURE RESEARCH

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Abstract

The commodified and highly competitive nature of professional football (soccer) has increased the professionalisation of organisational structures and management practices within clubs that enhance their competitive advantages within the labour market. This is a direct result of the financial rewards for success, and the potential cost of failure is significant. The utilisation of the Sporting Director position represents one strategy for organisations to improve both on and off-field performance success through maintaining organisational influence and control. Yet, the role is accompanied by a range of conceptual and operational misunderstandings. This commentary aims to examine the emergence of the Sporting Director and to offer some guidance on potential avenues for future research. Specifically, we consider, how social network theory might provide a theoretical framework to understand the role of the Sporting Director in practice better. To achieve this, this commentary is structured into five sections. First, we outline the role of corporate governance, senior executives and board membership, within organisational studies and the applicability of this for professional football. Second, we offer a contextual analysis of the business of professional football in Europe, and in particular its move towards globalisation and commodification. Third, we provide a current review of the Sporting Director role in professional football. Fourth, we explain the value of thinking relationally, using a social network approach, to better understanding the role of the Sporting Director within the global context. Finally, we offer some concluding thoughts and considerations surrounding the adoption of the Sporting Director role in England, and outline some potential research agendas concerning social network theory, and related concepts such as embeddedness, structural holes and the strength of weak ties.

Keywords: Football, Soccer, Sporting Director, Social Network Theory

Introduction

The professional football (or soccer) industry has an endemic stability problem. This is illustrated by the reputation for a high turnover of head coaches and the associated background staff, policy and cultural changes (Bridgewater, 2010). Indeed, employment

within professional football is characterised by limited tenure and a surplus of potential labour, all of which can lead to a social climate of employment instability, vulnerability, and Machiavellian political activity (Gibson and Groom, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b, 2014; Roderick and Schumacker, 2017). This instability has created challenges for clubs and their owners as they focus on delivering success on the pitch and protecting their investment. Rather than addressing this instability, as the game becomes hyper-commodified the actual number of coaches dismissed has increased (Gammelsæter, 2013) creating a negative cycle that creates even more instability. This is ironic given the importance of the head coach or manager to the success of a football club (Paola and Scoppa, 2011).

As a consequence of these market pressures, significant movements have been made to promote the role of Sporting Directors, who characteristically take responsibility for overseeing the football business and in some instances take responsibility for dismissing the head coach (Nissen, 2014). As such, there is a legitimate need to examine the role of Sporting Directors, as they are often overseeing the football club in a custodian role through periods of turmoil and change. Among other things, clubs/organisations require leadership, expertise, knowledge, culture, infrastructure, strategic and financial planning and or management, legal and contractual oversight, decision-making processes, control and coordination, and the management of human resources to be effective and successful within fast moving dynamic and global markets. Many businesses operate with a senior decision-maker such as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) on the board, responsible for approving all strategic decisions, and therefore accountable for the success or failure of the organisation's performance (Maitlis, 2004). However, the business management of sport, especially football, has had limited attention given over to this type of research, which is ironic given that this hierarchical structure has also typically been implemented by many professional football clubs within England and the substantial implications of performance success or failure.

This has added extra complexity, given the divergence of corporate governance structures in professional football across Europe (e.g. France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Portugal, Spain etc.), which differ to the traditional model within England, with many senior leaders in Europe occupying the position of Sporting Director. Indeed, many of the largest and most successful European football clubs in the world operate with a Sporting Director model (e.g. AC Milan, Ajax, Benfica, Inter Milan, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Sevilla etc.). Whilst some clubs within the UK have adopted a Sporting Director model (e.g. Liverpool FC, Rangers FC, Tottenham Hotspur FC, Southampton FC, Huddersfield Town FC), culturally the role of a Sporting Director has been treated by some in England with suspicion, and importantly we argue, a number of significant conceptual and operational misunderstandings. This commentary aims to further our conceptual understanding of the role of a Sporting Director within professional football in the England. Specifically, we consider, how social network theory might provide a theoretical framework to better understand the role of the Sporting Director in practice? Alongside this, given the paucity of research on this emerging role, we offer some theoretical concepts to guide future examination of the role. Through this paper, we argue that social network theory provides a parsimonious theoretical framework through which to understand the Sporting Director role in practice. The following sections provide insight into the business context of professional football, and operational insight into the Sporting Director role. Before presenting the value of 'thinking relationally' (through a social network approach) to understand the Sporting Director role in practice. Finally, we conclude the commentary with considerations for applied practice and future empirical research to provide a firmer foundation for the education of sporting directors and senior executives within professional football.

Corporate governance and directorship

The role of a board of directors is to provide direction and control over an organisation, to ensure that the company moves towards its goals and performs at a level to satisfy the shareholders or stakeholders within the organisation (Petrovic, 2008; Pye and Pettigrew, 2005). Research that examines the effectiveness of corporate governance typically examines either: (a) the systems and structures of boards or (b) internal board dynamics and board culture (Petrovic, 2008). However, companies differ both in their internal structure and organisational processes, as such measures of board effectiveness remain contested, which can be dependent upon how board member effectiveness is conceptualised (Petrovic, 2008; Pye and Pettigrew, 2005). Indeed, Petrovic (2008, p. 1380) explains that board member performance is influenced by the "complexity of relationships within a board", whilst Roberts, McNulty and Stiles (2005) describes board member function as being characterised by "uncertainty, incomplete information and interdependency, and where patterns of trust and distrust are often shifting" (p. 18). Though many studies do not distinguish between individual member characteristics and board characteristics, several qualities have been highlighted as being necessary for those serving on the board of directors. For example, drawing upon the review literature by Petrovic (2008), the critical roles of the board are: knowledge of the business (Renton, 1999; Ingley and Van der Walt, 2003), knowledge of other directors skills and abilities (Robert *et al*., 2005), understanding the context within which the business operates (Coulson-Thomas, 1991; Renton, 1999), strategic awareness (Coulson-Thomas, 1991; Renton, 1999), breadth of perspective, professional reputation and expertise (Ingley and Van der Walt, 2003), interpersonal skills and communicational skills (Coulson-Thomas, 1991; Ingley and Van der Walt, 2003; Pye and Pettigrew, 2005; Robert *et al*., 2005), motivation and commitment (Coulson-Thomas, 1991; Ingley and Van der Walt, 2003), and the ability to question and challenge (Robert *et al*., 2005).

The attributes that have been outlined as important for board members and senior executives across a range of organisations are also applicable to professional sporting organisations such as football clubs. However, the difference between a traditional CEO and a Sporting Director may be best understood by considering the importance of the following key characteristics typically possessed by a Sporting Director. One rationale for Sporting Directors is that they have football specific expertise; knowledge and experience of the intricacies of the business of professional football. This could include football performance from both a technical and tactical perspective, recruitment, talent identification, and sports science (see Parnell *et al*., 2018). Sporting Directors are often required to communicate with different parts of a football organisation in different ways, adapting to the language of the audience. For example, the ability to communicate effectively with technical (i.e. Manager, Coaches, Performance Analysts), medical (e.g. Team Physician, Physiotherapist, Rehabilitation Coach etc.), and playing staff (e.g. First Team Players, Development Team Players, Academy Players etc.). Additionally, Parnell *et al*. (2018) have highlighted that the Sporting Director is also required to communicate with an executive board (e.g. The Chair, Chief Financial Officer, Director of Communications, Director of Human Resources etc.), and potential external stakeholders such as fan groups and the media. Because of this expert football knowledge, the Sporting Director is often employed to represent all football matters to the board regarding team performance, short-term, medium-term and long-term planning, and performance updates and periodic reviews (Parnell *et al*., 2018).

Later in this paper, we explain that a central aspiration of the role of the Sporting Director is to provide stable management and leadership of the culture and day-to-day practices within the organisation. Principally, organisational culture, stability and control are achieved within professional football through human resource management, ensuring the release, recruitment and retention of staff aligned to the football clubs organisational goals

(Parnell *et al*., 2018). It is here where we offer a social network analysis theoretical lens to better understand the day-to-day practices and social interactions of Sporting Directors within professional football. We argue that much of the internal and external elements of the role are fundamentally based on relationships/networks and can, therefore, be better understood using a social network theory perspective. Indeed, we argue that a football club operates as a network with a variety of things flowing through them such as information, players, and money.

Conversely, football clubs are ultimately a collection of individuals who work collectively to ensure jobs are completed. A key role and position in the network, as we see it is the Sporting Director, who occupies a position beyond leadership and management. Therefore we propose may be better conceptualised as an *orchestrator* (central actor in social network terms) of the social network (i.e. staff, players, agents, and key stakeholders) both internally and externally to the organization (Gibson and Groom, 2018a; Jones and Wallace, 2005; Wallace, 2003, 2004). Wallace (2004) defines the metaphor of orchestration applied toward organisational life as:

> Co-ordinated activity within set parameters expressed by a network of senior leaders at different administrative levels to instigate, organise, oversee and consolidate complex change across parts, or all of, a multi-organisational system. (p. 58)

Wallace (2004) described the goal of orchestration as "maintaining momentum and ensuring that the set course is followed" (p. 64). In the context of the Sporting Director role, orchestration reaches beyond the temporal dimensions of *transformational leadership* (i.e. the transformation of culture through charismatic, motivational leadership, stimulation and support) towards long-haul leadership and management (Wallace, 2004). Indeed, whilst

Wallace (2004) has suggested that orchestration is complementary to elements of *transactional leadership* (i.e. through the promotion of the alignment of self-interest and reward), similarly to the Sporting Director context, it reaches further towards bringing about complex change across multi-layered systems in the context of ongoing work (i.e. the social network). To further our contextual analysis of the Sporting Director role the following section considers the changing commercial and financial landscape of professional football.

Background and financial landscape of professional football

Football is the world's most popular participation and spectator sport, with globalised flows of trade. Politically this global phenomenon is governed by FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) with over 200-member countries (Jewell, 2009). The English Premier League (EPL), the contextual focus of this article, is the most lucrative football league in the world (Ogbonna and Harris, 2014). The EPL, formed in 1992, was a breakaway of the more powerful clubs (linked to those most successful) from the traditional Football League's First Division in a bid to capitalise revenue opportunities (Madichie, 2009). The EPL has twenty teams, includes relegation, and teams that achieve success can qualify for European football competitions (Ogbonna and Harris 2014). The EPL is a global business and a significant example of hyper-commodification and is arguably the leading global football league (Deloitte, 2017).

Over the past two decades, the sport of professional football has undergone dramatic change, largely due to TV revenues and media rights (Morrow and Howieson, 2014). The financial reward associated with the EPL has seen increased foreign investment and ownership. Since the first major foreign investors, Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich's 2003 acquisition of Chelsea Football Club (Wilson *et al.*, 2013), many other EPL clubs are now with foreign ownership, for example:

- Arsenal FC: American based Stan Kroenke and Russian-Uzbek Alisher Usmanov,
- Manchester United FC: American based the Glazer family,
- Leicester City FC: Thailand based Khun Vichai,
- Liverpool FC: American based John Henry,
- Manchester City FC: Abu Dhabi based Sheikh Mansour,
- Southampton FC: Chinese based Jisheng Gao, and,
- Watford FC: Italian based Giampaolo Pozzo.

In their recent review of football finances (2015/16), Deloitte highlighted a continued growth in revenue across Europe's major leagues, in particular, the Premier League (Deloitte, 2017). Indeed, increases in the distribution of funding by from UEFA increased the income to some Spanish and English clubs by between 50-80%, whilst Premier League revenues rose to a record £3.6 billion (Deloitte, 2017). With regards to the labour market, English clubs remain the largest spenders on transfers in the world, whereas German and French clubs were net exporters of talent in the 2015/16 season (Deloitte, 2017). Despite such expenditure, between 2013/14, 2014/15, and 2015/16 Premier League clubs generated a combined profit of £1.6 billion, more than in the previous 16 seasons combined (Deloitte, 2017). Given the finances involved in the game, it is essential that resources are used effectively to deliver successful performances on and off the pitch.

The Sporting Director Role

Despite the global economic business transformation of football, English clubs have continued to favour the role of the traditional, archetypal football manager, 'the gaffer', who has overriding control over all footballing business at the club. This approach could be a result of conceptual and operational misunderstandings. Interestingly, the influx of foreign

ownership appears not to have the same antipathy to the Sporting Director role. The role of the Sporting Director is yet to receive a clear and agreed upon definition, even the title itself can be used interchangeably with; Technical Director, Director of Football, and Head of Football Operations all used within different football contexts (Parnell *et al*., 2018). For consistency within this paper, we refer to the Sporting Director, yet we accept that each club offers a unique context (see Parnell *et al*., 2018). Although popular in other European countries, the adoption of the Sporting Director role in England has remained controversial, given the different organisational structures implement across football clubs, where senior executive decision-making and hierarchical organisational process (Parnell *et al*., 2018; Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne and Richardson, 2010). Indeed, whilst the majority of clubs in the top leagues of Spain (e.g. Atletico Madrid), Italy (e.g. Juventus) and Germany (e.g. Bayern Munich) currently employ a Sporting Director, only a few English clubs do likewise (Church, 2012). The growing influence of directors and owners of professional football clubs in England is currently attracting considerable media attention (Kelly and Harris 2010). Moreover, this is accompanied by bespoke University courses (e.g., Manchester Metropolitan University), industry qualifications (e.g., The FA Level 5 Technical Directors course) and members association (i.e., the Association of Sporting Directors). This evidences the growing trend and interest in the Sporting Director role.

The Sporting Director role best describes someone who has overall responsibility for the performance of various sporting departments within a club. The Sporting Director role is to deliver a strategic plan and operate as a custodian of the club. They often have responsibilities for the first team, the academy, recruitment and scouting, sport science and medical departments. The Sporting Director will often act as the intermediate between the strategic apex of a football club (i.e., the Board) and sporting departments (Parnell *et al*., 2018).

The priorities of the Sporting Director may include supporting numerous assistants across the first team and academy departments (Parnell *et al*., 2018). They are also responsible for; developing a positive working relationship with the owners and Board, the recruitment of the best talent (on and off the pitch) within budget, and, develop a club-wide football philosophy to support the clubs sporting strategy. The Sporting Director is often renowned for their recruitment practice taking players in and out of the club. However, little attention is given to the support the Sporting Director may give to medical and sports sciences, or the academy environment – all of which can be critical for achieving short and long-term sporting objectives. As a consequence, the recruitment of Sporting Directors raises considerations around their skill-set and capabilities.

The Sporting Director represents the club's culture, values and long-term stability, which are often measured through short-term, medium-term and long-term sporting performance. The most common expertise demanded of Sporting Directors includes; football industry knowledge; business and financial acumen; ability to lead and develop a high-performance culture; ability to develop and deliver a strategy both strategically and operationally; understanding of - and the ability to deliver - good governance; ability to manage change and innovation; ability to manage research (monitor and evaluate) on relevant performance measures. As such, only focusing on recruitment does not truly reflect the broad and encompassing role of the Sporting Director.

The Sporting Director role is considered an essential role in European football clubs, yet still treated with suspicion by some in English football. This appears to stem from incongruence between the power structure between the first team manager and Sporting Director (Edwards, 2014). Indeed some managers may have found the new role a threat (James, 2013), particularly regarding recruitment (Smith, 2014). Yet, it is the responsibility of the Sporting Director to ensure the club is at the forefront of best practice, especially the

most effective recruitment strategies. This allows a head coach to primarily focus on managing the twenty-five plus players in a squad, taking training, picking the team and selecting the best tactics. Despite the first team manager being a traditional leadership role in football (Molan *et al*., 2016), the Sporting Director is primarily in place to support them. Whilst, it is clear that very little is known and that there exists very little empirical research concerning the role of the Sporting Director in football, the following section intends to offer some conceptual and operational clarity to the role. We propose that the Sporting Director, when viewed as a new management trend, is essentially a networked position/role. Moreover, given the gap in the research, we propose that it is pertinent to explore the Sporting Director role through the theoretical lens of social network analysis, to assist and inform future research and in turn practitioners operating within the industry.

Understanding the role of a Sporting Director through the lens of networks

In the following section, we outline the potential of social network theory as a theoretical lens through which the role and managerial practices of a Sporting Director may be better conceptualised and empirically examined. With disciplinary roots in sociology, social network analysis has been utilised in the field of social sciences, mathematics, health and medicine, labour markets, and political analysis to explain structures and relationships between social entities. This can be neatly described:

> "It is through personal networks that society is structured and the individuals integrated into society. ...daily life proceeds through personal ties: workers recruit in-laws and cousins for jobs on a new construction site; parents choose their children's paediatricians on the basis of personal recommendation; and investors get tips from their tennis partners. ... The interactions among the abstract parts of society – "the family", "the economy", and so on – usually turn out to be personal dealings between real individuals who know one another, turn out to be operations of personal networks. ... All through life, the facts, fictions, and arguments we hear from kin and friends are the ones that influence our actions most. Reciprocally, most people affect their society only through personal influences on those around them. Those personal ties are also our greatest motives for action: to protect relatives, impress friends, gain the respect of colleagues, and simply enjoy companionship"

(Charles Tilly, 1982 p.3)

When writing about Art, Howard Becker (1982) noted that Art Worlds consisted of people doing things together in a series of processes with established ways of working. That is, for art forms to exist as we know it (e.g. paintings, poems, books, and visual art), requires people to be involved in the process of construction, often in large numbers, working in collective action in a series of different steps (processes), with a predefined but always in flux set of conventions, mostly (although not always) with a clear division of labour. Here, Becker was concerned with the social organisation of this world, what he terms the 'sociological study of occupations' applied to artistic work (Becker, 1982). Similarly, Nick Crossley drawing heavily on Becker, developed the theory of relational sociology and using the toolkit of social network analysis explained how the social world is comprised of networks of interaction and relations (Crossley, 2011). For Crossley (2011), Becker's treatment of networks was impressionistic and failed to fully appreciate that networks are social 'structures' which generate both opportunities and constraints for their members. Both theories, however, agree that Worlds, be it Art or Music, or any other, involve people in *collective activity*.

Football (sport) much like Art or Music, is a social product (Maguire *et al.,* 2002), irrespective of the neo-liberalism ideology and practices sweeping through the sport, it remains deeply embedded in cultural and interactional processes, and warrants investigation through the lens of Worlds, that is through exploring social organisation of the production of football. In this article, we put forward the argument that football is a collaborative effort involving a complex division of labour and organisational effort, and as such must be treated as a Football World, in the Beckerian tradition. Therefore, as we see it Football Worlds, extends Becker's work into an alternative industry, but embraces Crossley's networked

version of worlds to explore social structure. Furthermore, within Worlds, there is almost always a commercial element that involves economic networks that sit within this collective activity, something Becker does not explore in his theoretical framework but is a central tenet in our understanding of how the economy is embedded in social

If we think of all the people involved in a Football World; the network of players, audiences, support personnel (managers, coaches, owners, stadium staff), manufactures of sport equipment, journalists and TV media, and this only begins to start to reflect the different people involved, and the many processes invoked before a ball is kicked. Everyone who collaborates in the production of football events makes up this World, and they are all involved in collective action. An integral part of the process in the modern football world is the role of the Sporting Director, who occupies a central position in this World. Unfortunately, many Sporting Directors do not understand the networked nature of this role and how embeddedness in social relations impacts their economic behaviour and ability to make rational decisions. The following section identifies the fundamental network structures that underpin economic activity and complement networks within Worlds. Whilst we offer illustrative examples related to the Sporting Director in football, we challenge the reader to further contextualise these concepts in the role and others in sport.

Networks and Embeddedness

If we envisage football as a World in the Beckarian sense, that is, as an interconnected system of relationships structured by networks, resources and conventions, with a clear division of labour and complexity in relation to power and trust, we perhaps start to reject the traditional neo-classical view of the football industry. Much of our understanding from a business perspective and the literature of football industry and those working within it is rooted in the theoretical economic frameworks, such as rational choice, utility maximisation,

supply and demand, access to all information, price takers and crucially independence. In this classical viewpoint, networks (social and economic) play only a frictional drag on business and management. Here we reject that assumption in favour of an economic sociology approach, where networks and social structure play a vital role within and between organisations, and to ignore them is absurd, especially in the context of the football industry where we believe they play a foundational role. By placing network theory at the centre of exploring further the role of the Sporting Director, we are placing a focus upon the importance of context and structure, and drawing upon economic thought, as a complementary rather than a critical account of the current literature.

Mark Granovetter (1985) a founding scholar of the 'new economic sociology', claimed that 'all economic action is embedded in social relationships', and produced a copious amount of research to back up this claim (Granovetter, 1973, 1985, 1995, 2017). He was not alone, Burt (1992, 2004, 2005), Uzzi (1996), and White (1992), have all shown that behaviour (individual and organisational) doesn't happen in a social vacuum, devoid of context, unaffected by social motives of compliance, power, sociability, or status. That is, social influences on economic choices cannot be regarded simply as disruptions or imperfections in otherwise natural economic arrangements. Economic action is socially situated, embedded in ongoing networks of personal relationships, rather than an atomised utility maximising actor (Swedberg & Granovetter, 2001).

This is important for Sporting Directors who must recruit the best team on and off the pitch (i.e., Head of Recruitment, Head of Performance, Head Coach, Head of Sport Science, Head of Analysis and Players etc.). In doing so, they rely on a complex network including intermediaries (supporting players recruitment in and out and the recruitment of the Head Coach) and often a network of trusted confidants to recommend a Head of Performance. Recent examples include the appointment of a senior/ European Scout at Fulham Football

Club, a Club operating in the second tier of English football. Was this based on their merit or the fact his father was the Assistant Head of Football Operations at the club? The new European Scout had no previous experience of scouting in an official capacity. Alternatively, the double appointment of the Head of European Scouting, and Head of Domestic Scouting at Norwich City FC in 2017/18 season, also residing in the second tier of English Football. There is no question on the suitability of such candidates; however, we can ask questions surrounding the recruitment process. Were these candidates recruited on their merit or because they previously worked with Norwich City FC's Sporting Director at another club?

This theory of embeddedness is well established in other areas of research on the economy, but little literature exists on its application to sport business management or the production of football. This is ironic, given the salient nature of networks within the industry, such as fan groups and movements, prosumers, agents, media and prevalence of networking in recruitment and talent identification. Underpinning embeddedness theory are three core network principles that impact upon how individuals make decisions. These principles are, first, closure and trust; second, strength of weak ties; and finally structural holes. Each of these underlying components of structure (or networks) play a pivotal role in what flows through the network and the importance of position in the structure, which facilitates or constrains decisions and actions.

In James Coleman's (1973) version of social capital, closure is an essential aspect of social and economic life. Closure here relates to a network of strong ties, what Robert Putnam (2000) terms bonding ties. Within these bonding ties high levels of trust form, which for Coleman were beneficial for creating social capital and advancement. Indeed, within these closed networks individuals cluster with people whom they share similar characteristics with, often referred to as homophily. In addition, individuals in these networks over time tend to share norms or conventions in Becker's Worlds analysis. In a business sense, high

trust networks are essential in cutting across complex situations allowing quick decisions to be made as those involved are likely to share similar outlooks, norms, values and be immersed in the conventions and culture of an organisation. Shared ways of working and behaviour flourish in these high trust networks, and culture is easily maintained – a culture that then impacts interactions within the network.

Whilst recognising the importance of closure in certain circumstances, Granovetter (1975), proposed a quite contradictory idea, arguing that it is weak ties that are essential for economic life. Granovetter (1973) demonstrated that weak ties bring new information into a network, allowing information concerning innovations, new ideas and new opportunities to flow through them. Access to weak ties are thus favourable for economic advancement. Granovetter coined this network theoretical approach as 'strength of weak ties', and since its inception it has been applied to many areas of research such as Job searchers (Granovetter, 1973, 1995), innovations (Reuf, 2002), entrepreneurship (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003), community collectives (Granovetter, 2017), and social movements (Cleland *et al*., 2017). For Sporting Directors, the idea of strength of weak ties adds a new perspective to traditional thinking, in that whilst creating an inner sanctum based on trust is an essential component in everyday working and culture creation, it is perhaps the weak ties that give a competitive edge. For example, at Norwich City Football Club in the English Championship, the recruitment of their Sporting Director Stuart Webber from Huddersfield Town Football Club (also then in the English Championship) signalled sweeping changes. One such change was the recruitment of a German FirstTeam Coach, Daniel Farke from German team Borussia Dortmund II. Whilst Webber may not have worked with the incoming First Team coach, he worked with David Wagner at Huddersfield Town Football Club who was previously from the same club as Farke – Borussia Dortmund II. During his time with Wagner, Webber spent time recruiting players in Germany with intermediaries (agents) and coaches. As such this

weak tie via Webber could have proved fundamental in Farke making the switch to Norwich City Football Club. Therefore, it is not necessarily the 'strong ties' within professional networks (i.e. the closest, most trusted connection) but the 'weak ties' (i.e. more removed connections) that lead to success in job searches and recruitment.

Ronald Burt, a sociologist from the University of Chicago, viewed the network world of work and life slightly differently from Granovetter. Burt (1992) suggested that rather than weak ties generating social capital and a competitive advantage, it was rather position in a network that was essential, not simply ties or connections. In a theory that was given book-length treatment, Burt (1992) laid down the theoretical construct of 'Structural Holes'. Structural holes for Burt are key to success and competition. Structural holes are where separate components of networks exist, that is two networks can co-exist and be unaware of each other (they can also be aware) because they are not connected, this for Burt represents a structural hole and those that can fill it reap the rewards. These structural holes can exist within and between organisations and different economic actors. The fundamental idea is those who fill the hole can get capital. It works on the premise that an actor bridging a structural hole can broker between two parties, that is, they can introduce people or organisations together, share and direct information (such as opportunities). However, they can also conversely leverage their position, create tension between two parties or control the information and message — either way, structural holes give those who fill it competitive advantage.

Take the example of two Sporting Directors who are interested in player *x* from club *y*. On the surface each Sporting Director has access to the same information and price is determined by the market. Therefore, the decision to purchase player *x* will be based on the budget line. However, remember in this paper we reject this imperfect view of the marketplace in favour of networks of social relations. Recruitment is made much more

complex because of these social relationships and network structure, which impact decisions and economic actions. Players and clubs can be represented by intermediaries (or agents) who may broker between two parties in a transaction. The presence of an intermediary fills a structural hole if the two Sporting Directors are unaware of the other's motives, as such the intermediary/agent can leverage their position and withhold information, complicating the buying process and driving up the price (competitive advantage). This is just one example of many within the industry (internal and external). Critically, the Sporting Director not only needs to know how to fill structural holes, they also need to know who fills them, and decide to keep them open (as this can also be beneficial, for example, an internal member of staff who knows everyone and is a source of social capital) or close it.

In the theory of embeddedness, the underlying assumption of economic sociology, these three network concepts, closure, strength of weak ties, and structural holes perform an important role in economic transactions. The position and structure of these networks and what flows through them is an essential element form economic advantage. The Sporting Director needs to understand social structure and relational embeddedness and how they impact decision making, both facilitating and constraining. Furthermore, they need to be aware of the influence outside organisations have on decisions, because now Sporting Director live and work within a network of networks.

Conclusion

The Sporting Director model in England is changing rapidly as it adapts to influences from Europe, which is having a major impact upon the behaviour, culture and business operations of football clubs. This structural change is not only operating at the elite level; there is a growing ideology amongst senior management and owners of clubs to adopt a model of the Sporting Director. Indeed, modern sports organisations are a network, sitting in

a structure of internal and external relationships, and the Sporting Director role has a prominent position in these networks, one that we proposed it better understood as a network *orchestrator* (Gibson and Groom, 2018; Jones and Wallace, 2005; Wallace, 2003, 2004). The success of the Sporting Director is not isolated to recruitment or talent identification, indeed, we argue that it is whether they master the networks they operate within, through the utilization of both 'strong' and 'weak ties', build sufficient levels of trust, and operate within structural holes and fundamentally where they exist (Granovetter, 2017). Actions are constrained and facilitated by internal and external network structures. That is, all actions (economic or social) of the Sporting Director are embedded in social relations (Parnell *et al*., 2018). Within the specific context of the Sporting Director role in professional football, actions are the social interactions that occur between the Sporting Director, the board, the manager, the playing staff, the coaching staff and the support staff, agents, the fans, the media, and other external organisations etc. Importantly, it is these daily networked interactions within an organisation and with external stakeholders that create, reinforce and reproduce organisations culture (i.e. the day-to-day practice, behavioural norms and behavioural boundaries – 'what people do (or do not do), how they do it and why they do it'. The organisational culture, which is created through social interactions, then impacts upon the interactions within the organisation, which facilitates or restrict certain actions (i.e. acceptable vs unacceptable). Given the central role of the Sporting Director, in the network as an *orchestrator*, the Sporting Director must understand this when attempting to alter or reinforce cultural norms and values.

Furthermore, information flow can be impacted upon by specific network configurations, and the roles of others. They must bridge structural holes with the organisation or identify when they exist, understand the strength of weak ties, create bonding ties to generate trust, and understand power dynamics as a network function (Parnell *et al*.,

2018). Football clubs, exist in Football Worlds; this world is made up of networks, which have structure and structure always has consequences.

From an applied industry perspective, we argue that networks must be better understood by Sporting Directors (CEOs and executives) before they can begin to exploit its opportunities. We recommend that networks should feature in the education of Sporting Directors in order to ensure future practitioners and leaders to be able to understand and exploit their networks. Finally, we would like to position this paper as a clarion call for other researchers to examine Football Worlds, through the lens of networks. In particular, we highlight three critical areas for scholars to undertake empirical research and build a greater understanding of Football Worlds; these are (i) embeddedness, (ii) structural holes and (iii) the strength of weak ties.

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